



Nīkau palm

Native plants

The nīkau palm is the southernmost member of the palm family, a group that is usually tropical or sub-tropical. There are over 1100 palm species around the world, including some of the world's most useful plants such as the oil palm, banana, coconut, and sago palm. Although a number of palms have been introduced to New Zealand and are planted around our towns and gardens, the nīkau palm is our only native palm species.

A nīkau palm usually grows about 10 to 15 metres tall. It is easy to recognise in the bush with its circular trunk, which is ringed with evenly spaced scars from fallen leaves. The fronds are up to three metres in length.

Nīkau on Chatham islands
I. Flux



Where is it found?

The nīkau palm is unique to New Zealand and it primarily occurs in coastal to lowland forest in warmer regions. It is found in the North Island and the northern South Island from the Marlborough Sounds and Nelson south to near Okarito in the west and Banks Peninsula (near Christchurch) in the east.

Nīkau palms also grow on the Chatham Islands, and some botanists believe the plants there belong to a separate species.

Two of the easiest places to see nīkau palms are Punakaiki in Paparoa National Park and Kohaihai at the start of the Heaphy track, where a mild climate encourages their growth year-round.

Nīkau facts

- The nīkau sprouts large clusters of mauve flowers that burst from the base of the lowest branch. The flowers are sticky and sweet with nectar, which attracts insects, especially bees.
- While insects are probably the main pollinators, birds such as tui, bellbirds and silvereyes also enjoy the nīkau nectar. Flowers occur throughout the entire year.
- The bright red nīkau fruits take about one year to ripen and are an important food source for native birds, particularly the wood pigeon/kererū and kākā.
- Nīkau palms have always had importance in Māori life. The leaves were used to thatch houses, to wrap food before cooking, and to weave into hats, mats, baskets, and leggings for travelling through rough undergrowth. The growing spikes can be taken from the tree about every eight months without killing it.
- From the outer portion of the trunk, Māori made storage containers and pots. The hard berries were made into necklaces or eaten when green.
- The immature flower is edible and can be cooked and eaten like cauliflower. The heart of the



developing leaves (called rito) can also be eaten raw, but taking the shoots kills the whole tree.

- The nīkau is very slow-growing. Research conducted in lowland forests near Auckland found it takes 40–50 years to begin to form a trunk and about 200 years to reach 10 metres tall. On average two fronds are shed per year leaving behind a leaf scar on the trunk which can be used to give a rough indication of age since the trunk began forming.
- The nīkau is closely related to the betel nut, the seeds of which are used as a laxative. The centre shoots of nīkau can be used in the same way.

Did you know?

Some say that when Māori came to New Zealand, they looked in vain for a familiar tree and seeing the nīkau, compared it to the coconut tree of their Pacific homeland. One translation of 'nīkau' is 'without nuts, in remembrance of the coconut. An alternative translation is 'only leaves', referring to the fact that the tree has many leaves that originate from a single stalk.



Nīkau trunk C. Rudge
L. Molloy

Threats

Because nīkau palms grow primarily in coastal and lowland areas, their habitat has been greatly reduced and disturbed by human development and land conversion. Introduced mammals may also pose a threat by eating nīkau flowers and fruit so that fewer new plants are produced.

Further information

For more information about nīkau palms, please contact your local Department of Conservation office or visit www.doc.govt.nz.

Nīkau fruit
R. Suggate

